

Meeting Notes

Event: Chancellor's Community Forum

Topic: DCPS Early Childhood Services - 90% of Brain Development Occurs by the Age of Five

Presenters: Miriam Calderon, Nathaniel Beers, Melissa Grant

Date: October 28, 2009, 6:30pm - 8:00pm

Overview: We started forums last year as an opportunity to proactively discuss initiatives and get community feedback. Part of the reason a significant amount of resources have been poured into Early Childhood is because we know that in order to improve DCPS we must start in the early years. We want to make sure that we have many high quality programs and create access for kids before they begin school so we can improve success in the District for the long term. Our panel tonight brings 3 unique perspectives: the district level, the program level, and the classroom level.

Attendance: Michelle Rhee, Chancellor; Miriam Calderon, Director of Early Childhood Education; Nathaniel Beers, Director of Early Stages; Melissa Grant, DCPS Teacher; Constituents

Notes:

Miriam Calderon, Director of Early Childhood Education

The earliest years of life set a strong foundation for a child's learning. We know through evidence and research that whether a child participates in pre-school / pre-k will make a tremendous difference in their long-term success and performance. The cost of not participating in pre-school can be tremendous on the community. The cost of failure later in life, not only in education but also in social services, can be about \$5-\$7 per individual, so there is a high return on investment for early childhood education in society. There are 4,500 3 & 4 year old students in DCPS. 40% are served through Head Start. 100% of elementary schools have Pre-K programs. We are building a program around quality. We are looking at the new teaching and learning framework as an opportunity to support the best efforts. We are committed to supporting our teachers in helping implement the framework. All of these activities lead to positive child outcomes.

Nathaniel Beers, Director of Early Stages

Early Stages is the newly renovated diagnostic center used to capture kids early before it becomes a problem in later years. In order to do that we need to identify 3-5 year olds and offer intervention services. Many of you have met our staff as you came in tonight. In DC, we identify 2-3% of children with special needs when the national average is 6%. To meet the goal we need to have a robust Child Find Team. We need to have a presence, visibility, and availability. We also needed to have a new website, which is up and ready to use. It is exciting that parents can refer children online. In December,

the screening to will also be online. In order to be successful, we have to make sure we change the processes that are going on inside the center. The evaluations at Early Stages are based upon review from highly qualified staff. We are making sure that we follow up with all of the children we see regardless of if they are eligible. Evaluations are center-based at this time, rather than in the natural setting, and many of the kids get a very robust evaluation at the center. We will also be performing vision and hearing screenings and follow up for all children. Children who are eligible will have Family Care Coordinators to help the parents throughout the process and will help them think about what educational pieces will benefit their individual child. Children who are not eligible will receive a check up every six months. As far as placements, we want to make sure that every child has the least restrictive environment. We want to make sure to support the Special Education and General Education teachers moving forward. There is substantial data to show that a kid with special needs benefits from inclusion. On a personal note, my daughter is learning sign language in her inclusion class and it is incredibly exciting. Also, problem solving skills can be important for us to remember as we are building the program to be successful for all of our kids.

Melissa Grant, DCPS Teacher

My class has 15 students, both General Education and Special Education. There are 2 teachers, a classroom aide, and a dedicated aide. It is inherent in the teaching of Special Education to be an investigation. I make no assumptions about my students' strengths or their weaknesses. Every student processes information in a different way. My instruction is multi-sensory. This approach provides a deeper understanding and construction of knowledge. Skill building is incorporated into their daily routines. The classroom makes the most of every moment. Students are encouraged to help their friends and teachers. We encourage good citizenship by helping others with their needs. All of this is based on the desire for kids to be with their peers. This setting develops their ability for cooperative work in higher grades. It also encourages students to ask for help. Parents of children with special needs are concerned about their children being accepted among their peers. All of the students have incorporated the adaptations into their routine. We discuss why we ask questions and we learn about what we do not know. The special needs of individual students are a component of the study and a springboard. When pushed to analyze, students are able to make their own discoveries. Tolerance comes from their own understanding.

Video Activity: (Calderon)

Everyone should have picked up the Kindergarten Readiness Standards. Watch the video and take note of what the kids are doing. What does a good standards-based appropriate rigor look like?

{VIDEO PLAYS}

Take a few minutes, look at your notes, and compare your notes with the Kindergarten Readiness Standards. What evidence did you see? Take a few minutes to review and we will hear some thoughts from the group.

{GROUP SHARING OF OBSERVATIONS}

We saw 7 of the 8 domains in the video. How do I help children master those skills? What is developmentally appropriate? Intentional teaching is what we want to see.

Issue	Comments
Secretary Duncan discussed having national Core Standards. How do those standards interact with the Standards we have here?	<p>(Chancellor): Secretary Duncan discussed a common set of national standards. I am a fan of that. Right now we have 50 different states and 50 different measures. It is very difficult to gauge national progress because we are using different standards. The children we educate today will be competing with kids in India and China, which means we need standards. This will be difficult to get to because every state has pooled resources to adopt their own standards and may not be open to abandon those standards in support of another state's ideas. Nonetheless, 49 out of 50 governors expressed interested in learning more about creating national standards for education.</p> <p>(Calderon): Not every state has early childhood learning standards. We are fortunate in DC to have these.</p>
There has been some talk about aligning Pre-K with the rest of the school continuum. In the classroom and the District level, what is being done in the district to build upon the gains that kids get in the Early years?	<p>(Grant): We are using tools from Early Stages to assess globally. Although we are following the same guidelines as the schools, I'm not aware of any plans to have a standardized assessment.</p> <p>(Calderon): With Pre-K and K, we are starting with a common assessment. This will help with our standards and help teachers get access to data. This should be incorporated by next year.</p> <p>(Beers): For Special Education kids we are looking to utilize the same tool. We want to use a tool that is wide enough in span so that we can use the same instrument regardless of where the kids are on the spectrum. We hope to move to a system that tracks progress for all kids regardless of if they are in a General Education or Special</p>

	Education domain.
There has been a trend to become more academic with young kids as opposed to play-based instruction. What is the state of the art? Do you want to teach calculus to kindergarteners?	(Calderon): I get calls from parents that say, 'all I see my child doing is playing and they need to be learning'. If it looks like unstructured play, I would agree with that parent's concern. At the same time, we have to bring child development knowledge into teaching and remember how they best learn to create those kinds of experiences. This was demonstrated in the video, as the teacher extended the child's learning through reinforcement. This is an issue in the field, and we definitely need to expect more of early childhood programs. Nonetheless, it has to be done in an appropriate way. We need to challenge young children in a way that remembers where they are developmentally.
How do we promote equal and fair treatment of children but also give specialized treatment as needed?	<p>(Grant): We have to explain to children why they need what they need. We have an open and honest discussion and share ideas to avoid misunderstanding. It has more to do with them understanding the concept of friendship and citizenship. Then they try to understand how it helps. This direction works really well.</p> <p>(Beers): Kids start where they are. As a society we teach people not to look at people with disabilities, but for young kids that is not the right message. It is important to allow the question to be asked. It is not a judgment issue when they are 3 or 4 years old. We know that kids who have been in inclusive settings are much more open, much less likely to bully, than children who have not been exposed. We have to support the inquisitiveness and just because there are differences does not mean we don't talk about the differences.</p>

<p>Because of the Special Education resources and systems in place, I was challenged to learn more about inclusion and I now know the rewards. Do you have a parental component to early intervention? It is one thing to house and help the children throughout the day, but where is the component that allows parents to be drawn in so that they don't negate the good work?</p>	<p>(Beers): I think you're right. Part of this is about the message in general. Dr. Nyankori is committed to getting inclusion done right. It is about more than just the benefit for the kids with special needs. It is about getting the community to understand why inclusion can be beneficial to all kids. There are many pieces of information out there about successes in an inclusive setting. <i>Including Samuel</i> is a new documentary about inclusion from a parent's perspective. How do we make sure that all the teachers see it and all the principals see it? This is about all kids with special needs having the capacity to be educated in their neighborhood school as the least restrictive environment. If we can work with parents to help them understand why it is valuable to all of our kids, then we can change the dynamics of the conversation and eventually change a generation. We must start that dialogue early.</p> <p>(Grant): General Education parents were concerned that the curriculum would be watered down and their kids would not be as challenged in an inclusion setting. We have the staff that we need to serve those kids specifically. I have to prove to General Education parents that their child is being challenged in this environment. I invite the families in to observe class discussions so they can see for themselves. Through that, even very skeptical families have come around quickly to the idea of inclusion.</p>
<p>If you have a child in your class who has not been identified, who is in the neighborhood school, and it is clear the child needs help, how quickly can you get services or have that child identified?</p>	<p>(Beers): Timely means that we are pressing beyond what the DC standards are and going back to the federal regulation. We want a real plan to be in place within 60 days. We have more aggressive internal targets because for many children and families, waiting 60 days is too long. Any critical situation can be addressed within 1-2 weeks, and includes the school in the process as well.</p>

<p>Every parent of a young child should have this information. Can we do some sort of presentation like this at the schools? Lots of people would be able to deliver the content. This is cutting edge. It is exciting to be cutting edge as it pertains to early childhood. What does Early Stages offer for early childhood? If we could address these topics with great training materials, I would be willing to try it out.</p>	<p>(Beers): We have Child Find staff that is willing and ready to come out to talk with parents and teachers. One of the things we are trying to do long term is to get everyone involved along the way to share our message including day cares, healthcare providers, and other community organizations. We are developing the materials to empower you, and we are also available to present on-site.</p>
<p>What is the interaction between early childhood instructors and kindergarten instructors?</p>	<p>(Calderon): Some of that is done at the school level. There are different definitions of early childhood. In DCPS, we are talking about 3-year olds and 4-year olds, pre-school and pre-K programs. We have training on Friday for pre-school and pre-K teachers, not Kindergarten. Nonetheless, our goal is to extend it to Kindergarten.</p> <p>(Guest): Everyday we have common planning time across grade levels. We take teachers out to other classrooms and schools to see what others are doing. Early childhood uses great instructional strategies that get lost in the upper grades. We would like to inspire middle school teachers to adopt some of these strategies.</p> <p>(Guest): the conversation goes both ways. There are ways to balance play and rigor. The DC Early Childhood certification goes from pre-school to 3rd grade. We should extend this. We shouldn't stop playing as a way to learn.</p>
<p>If the child is in a home healthcare setting, what are the criteria for child find?</p>	<p>(Beers): All kids who live in the District become our responsibility at 2 years, 9 months. We also recognize that parents have children of other ages. We can do a whole lot with kids if we get them at age 3. We are doing what we can to get the parents to start looking for signs even earlier. Our goal is to work with our partners at OSSE to have more open dialogue. Most parents don't know the difference between OSSE and DCPS because it's all education to them. The new initiative is to change the consent so that the information can be shared between groups. Also, we want to be prepared, and if we know the child</p>

	<p>is coming, then we can be proactive rather than reactive. We want to build the right systems for these kids by creating a more collaborative process.</p>
<p>How are Art and Music tied into the curriculum? I've heard that DCPS does not support Art and Music education?</p>	<p>(Chancellor): We think that Art, Music, and PE are incredibly important to a child's education. Many schools in DC did not offer instruction in Art and Music. The schools that did have them raised the money on their own and were located predominantly west of the park. One of the good things to come from the school closings was that we were able to ensure that every school had an Art, PE, and Music teacher. Even though we went through budget cuts, we wanted to preserve the comprehensive model. The question of play vs. academics continues throughout schooling. We want to hold schools accountable for how students progress academically, but numerous studies have shown that children who have access to a broad-based curriculum perform better overall. We think these subjects are important to preserve.</p>
<p>Can you offer parents insight on how to evaluate Early Childhood programs for proficiency?</p>	<p>(Chancellor): Look at how the school is performing overall because that indicates that the whole program is strong. We are working with OSSE to make sure that standardized assessments are in place so that we can make sure to report that information to parents as well. We want parents to have data to review on every level. One of the advantages of being a small school system is that we can troubleshoot and offer customer service in a different way. We have an out of boundary process as well. More importantly, we ask parents to call us directly. We have Placement Specialists who will be able to provide much of the information that is not readily available on the website.</p> <p>(Calderon): We also want to ensure that each school has appropriate ratios, highly-qualified teachers, authentic assessments, and that connections between learning and progress are</p>

	<p>clearly communicated to parents. We want parents to have this information so that you can reinforce at home what is being done in the schools. These are things that are in regulations because these are the things that are going to make a difference. Standards are not just in place for teachers, but they are there for you too. I have twins and every six months I will check the developmental milestones to make sure that I've observed those behaviors.</p>
<p>How soon should we be looking to place our kids or look for good schools?</p>	<p>(Chancellor): It is never too early. At 3 years old or sooner. Actually, we are in talks with one group of parents who have children that are almost 2 years old and are looking to set something up within the next two years. Prenatal may be too early, but once you have little ones its time to start talking with DCPS, to figure out how to work over time to create a high-quality program.</p>